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SENATE PANEL FINDS NO RULES VIOLATED ON LIBYAN INFORMATION
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WASHINGTON

The Senate Intelligence Committee has concluded that there was no policy decision by the Reagan administration to plant false stories about Libya with U.S. news media, its staff director said Friday.

In an interview, Bernie McMahon said, however, that there probably are government officials who leak deliberate misinformation, or merely erroneous data, on any number of topics, to meet their own objectives. He said he saw little way to halt that practice, and that even news organizations would object to the rules which might stop it.

A swift inquiry by the committee staff was begun after The Washington Post reported Thursday that an elaborate White House campaign this past August included "a disinformation program with the basic goal of making (Libyan leader Moammar) Gadhafi think that there is a high degree of internal opposition against him within Libya, that his key trusted aides are disloyal, that the U.S. is about to move against him militarily." The plan was described in a three-page memorandum sent to President Reagan by John M. Poindexter, the national security adviser, and "the basic plan" was adopted at a White House meeting Aug. 14, the Post said.

"Everyone's assuming Poindexter's memo was what was approved," McMahon said. "Was there a policy decision to draft and place deliberately false stories in the American press or through agents of influence, either by the CIA or outside the CIA in the National Security Council or the State Department? The answer to that is no. There was no decision made to undertake such an activity." Reagan denied anew Friday that the administration had attempted to mislead people about Gadhafi.

"No, we didn't tell any lies, and we weren't doing any of these disinformation things that we've been cited with doing," he said, replying to a shouted question as he walked toward his helicopter for a weekend at Camp David.

"We simply, as I said before, wanted him to understand that if he tried any more of the same type of terrorist acts, we would react," Reagan said.

The Senate committee looked into the matter because an executive order on intelligence issued by Reagan in 1981 authorizes the CIA to conduct secret special activities, including disinformation campaigns, so long as they "are not intended to influence United States political processes, public opinion, policies, or media." "We're satisfied there was neither a violation of the spirit or letter nor any attempt to find or exploit a loophole, such as saying it was being done abroad but really intending it for here," McMahon said.

He would not confirm whether a disinformation campaign involving foreign news media had been approved.

He said the committee has a continuing concern over so-called "blowback" into U.S. publications of disinformation spread by the U.S. government secretly abroad, "but there is no new specter of concern as a result of this incident. We're satisfied every precaution is taken to prevent blowback, and we watch that carefully." The Wall Street Journal, in an Aug. 25 story, reported that the United States and Libya were on a collision course and described renewed Libyan backing for terrorism. The Post reported Thursday that the article contained "false information generated by the new plan." Asked if the committee found that some administration officials had implemented disinformation proposals without authorization, McMahon said the committee was not terribly interested in that question.

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"There is no truth-in-briefings law," he replied. "Our purpose is to keep the government from doing this as a matter of policy, but I'm not sure you're ever going to get people to always tell the truth." "If a rogue disinformation elephant leaks it without authorization, then the press is a victim of its own curiosity," McMahon said. "If he holds public news conference to spread it, he's going to get caught the first time." And he said the committee was "not in a position to say if someone at a White House background briefing was lying or just misinformed." He said that on the question of what actions the United States will take in foreign affairs, U.S. newspapers are constantly filled with conflicting speculation from different government officials.

"In the absence of a policy violating the rules, is there a rogue disinformation guy, some guy out of control, spouting nonsense to meet his objectives? Probably there are some out there," McMahon said. "I don't think they ought to be leaking, but nobody's terribly concerned about it." McMahon argued that the only way to prevent those contradictions from individual officials pushing pet schemes would be to have all statements to reporters cleared in advance by higher government authority, "and I don't think that news organizations would be eager to see such a regulation imposed." McMahon dismissed the idea that several officials could have conspired to produce a formal policy calling publicly for conformance to the rules while privately agreeing to violate them.

"Of course, they can break the law. The president or the CIA director can break the law, but I don't think a conspiracy is credible," McMahon said. "There are people of integrity at the top of the government who wouldn't agree to it. If they were doing that about something like this, then they would be doing some pretty horrible things around the world, which I don't see." He said, however, that the panel would be concerned if individual officials decided to carry out a political assassination without approval, because "that's a different kettle of fish. No one can do that under any circumstances."